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ABSTRACT

In higher education now, educators are faced with teaching students who are not seen as exceptional, in traditional academic terms--even the exceptional ones do not seem to read habitually. The paper argues that among the elements hostile to development of writers of prose might be found elements more conducive to the development of writers of poetry--and then prose. Personal experience and reflections, and those reported by students, suggest that the development of poetry writing potential carries with it improvement in some students' writing over the curriculum. This action research paper is organized into two sections: the tutor's description of the poetry writing course at Waikato Polytechnic in New Zealand, including an outline of her expectations in learning goals, followed by student feedback at the end of the course and some time after the course; and a discussion taken from personal reflections, including the more speculative as well as the ones based on reading, in response to that feedback. (Contains 21 references.) (NKA)

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Poetry for Praxis too

by Varvara A. Richards

Our experience and feedback from students, suggests that even a brief engagement with poetry writing can prove useful in other kinds of writing where, for example, accurate word choice and economy of expression are valued. In fact, the evidence that we reflected on made us wonder if the idea of transference here were too obvious and we had been mistaken to think our experience, and that of our students, would carry anything significant for academics with experience of teaching writing.

That question led us to consider why we, as experienced teachers, were so surprised - and intrigued - when several former students from a particular poetry writing course volunteered that learning to harness language, for synthesizing and transforming experience, had had much broader application for them. We had to consider whether our surprise was partly because of the collective nature of that particular group of students. Certainly, they were a group whose study was directed towards the more commercial, and more scientific. Usefully, for our reflections, those in the reporting group were able to be quite specific about the ways in which their poetry writing experiences had enhanced their writing proficiency. Inevitably, in considering the student feedback, we discussed the course content, and the teaching and learning patterns of the class. We were intent on identifying those elements crucial to the list of specific improvements to their writing that these students had identified.

To broaden our study, we would value the experience of others who have found that the process of writing poetry is useful for improving writing more generally. In the interest of furthering action research in the area, we invite colleagues to share their evidence of the crossover between the development of language for poetry and for prose.

Introduction

Finding Forrester, the current film, provides me with a conduit with which to connect our experience of teaching writing in Australasia with that more generally experienced in the western world. I found a seat in the film while not finding a bookshop in the largest shopping center in Sheffield, and the big screen brought me into contact with teaching/learning matters, focused on writing, as they manifest themselves in the wider world. We were given the well-known essential ingredients for making a writer of a seemingly unlikely candidate, in very unlikely circumstances.

The film opens with rap, quintessential rhythm with sometimes intelligible words that seem squashed into that rhythm, a new generation cockney slang. The plot is concerned with how Jamal Wallace, a young black man in the Bronx and main character, develops his writing with the help of the aging once-famous reclusive author, William Forrester. All the elements, recommended by our own experience of writing and teaching writing, are contributing factors. The 16 year old, who scores well on the dreaded achievement tests (so revered in these parts still, we understand), is shown to be prodigious at reading and remembering not only substance, but phrases and lines from what he reads. And he keeps notebooks, for his own scribbles, which he carries even to the basketball court. Finding Forrester provides him with place, time, modelling, method, and feedback loops.

The learning situation in even more traditional terms is better than standard, even ideal, for Wallace's development as a writer. Add the young man's motivation, the establishment of the relationship with his mentor/teacher by stages, including sufficient mutual respect and challenge, and his development becomes credible, even predictable. But Wallace is also a throwback, altogether exceptional in his society, plunged by scholarship (based on standardized test scores *and* his basketball prowess – this is the USA after all) into a prestigious school. He proves able to reciprocate for the challenges posed by the new environment, and those from Forrester. He is also able to provide the human contact and warmth to which Forrester ultimately attributes the production of his next novel, to be foreworded by Jamal Wallace.

Among those qualities are ones that we perceive to be not so much given Wallace by the things that set him apart from his society; rather, they are given to him by that society and his response to it. In other words, the very society from which he hid his talent by excelling on the basketball court and being among the invisible mediocre in his classroom, grounded him in an ambience - including values - from which he was able to reciprocate for the learning structure provided by his mentor.

He was not representative of the vast majority of students, like his fellows in the Bronx - students perhaps more like some that we are challenged to teach to write - even while he was *of* those students. And maybe this acknowledgement carries with it a recognition by which we can presume to connect the more challenging experiences of

our teaching experience in New Zealand to what we imagine might be experienced by some teachers and students of writing elsewhere.

In higher education now we are faced with teaching students who are not seen as exceptional, in traditional academic terms; even the exceptional ones do not seem to read habitually. This poses a challenge central to our difficulties in teaching these students to write. Accepting such challenges might position us to explore ways of taking students into writing by ways other than the ones we know.

Our thesis is based on the premise that the society from which Wallace hid his talent, like our own, contains elements which might be tapped into, reflexively, in order to promote writing more generally among the young people there. We argue that among the elements hostile to development of writers of prose might be found elements more conducive to the development of writers of poetry - and then prose. Those identified in the film as useful for this thesis include the warmth and communication between Wallace and his family and friends who provided emotional support throughout, even after his secret talent was exposed, and the poetic facility that was apparent in the recurring rap throughout the film. Further, our experiences and reflections, and those reported by students, suggest that the development of poetry writing potential carries with it improvement in some students' writing over the curriculum. If this can be endorsed by experiences wider than those we present here, then we may be onto a track to the kind of reflexivity which we are challenged to aspire to in our teaching in higher education by, for example, Ronald Barnett's (1997) vision.

The action research paper below is organized into two sections. We begin with the tutor's description of the course from which our paper sprang, including an outline of her expectations in learning goals, followed by student feedback at the end of the course, and some time after the course. This is followed by a discussion taken from our reflections, including the more speculative as well as the ones based on our reading, in response to that feedback.

Our combined experience (writing and teaching writing), stretches over several decades. In addition to that experience, we are indebted to, besides Barnett (see above), an eclectic group so wide ranging that we wonder at bringing them together. But perhaps this is the nature of this contribution (and our learning) process. After Paulo Freire (and Ira Shor), we believe that alienation is the chief block to learning. Only in the absence of that obstacle can a voice for the deeply social activities of reading and writing be achieved.

Lev Vygotsky (and his translators) contributes a construct in his 'zone of proximal development' which describes what we habitually do in helping students to establish a voice for writing. Vygotsky's zone describes the distance between where a student is at the beginning of a lesson and where that student might progress given the guidance, support and challenge of a teacher. In order to work in terms of this construct one must stay in constant touch with where students are as they progress through a scaffolding

construct, designed by the mentor/teacher, with questions, words of encouragement, gestures, and so on.

Howard Gardner, and his theory of multiple intelligence (1997), especially his analysis of linguistic intelligence, provides us with additional palpable reason to consider our use of metaphor. In turn, Lakoff and Johnson's delineation of the power of metaphors is a helpful adjunct to the meta-cognition that Neil Haigh and Jenny Moon have convinced us is central to more effective learning at tertiary level.

Abrams and Greenblatt, in their introduction to the Norton Anthology, reminded us of the movement in communication patterns in English, oral to print. This helped us to see the changing nature of communication and to understand its fluidity which in turn helped us to consider the dotcom and television impact on writing and on social change with more dignity. Overall we are struggling, with others I trust, to comprehend the changes that the rapid dissemination of information poses for us as teachers of writing, and of critical thinking and action. And we are indebted to a variety of others who are cited in due course. But first, acknowledgement is due the students who are responsible for bringing so many unexpected strands together for us.

Overview of the Writing Workshop at The Waikato Polytechnic

As part of the Media Arts degree at The Waikato Polytechnic, the Communications Department had for the past three years offered a Writing Workshop as a one-semester elective for students from courses in, for example, journalism, photography, art, and marketing. Students studied *Writing from Memory, Short Story Writing,* and *Poetic Writing* in that order. Each class ran for 3-4 hours weekly with five weeks devoted to each of these aspects of writing. The Poetic Writing segment was designed to include analysis of poetry, poetry writing, peer feedback, tutor feedback, and one-to-one tutoring. The only materials required were pen, paper, and a thesaurus.

Objectives:

- Students' ability to write creatively would improve. This would come from having good role models to read and analyze, having regular practice in writing, and getting feedback from other students and from the tutor on what worked well.
- Students would better understand how poetry works. This would be a direct result of close analysis and an appreciation of how techniques can enhance what a poet is saying.
- They would better appreciate the variety in poetry from the selection provided, and from any others they wished to bring to class.
- Some might discover a talent they didn't know they had. Not all students would have written poetry before.
- Some might find writing poetry a constructive way of dealing with difficult issues.

I used a layered approach which meant that each day's lesson plan was built on the one before, but each followed much the same format. In a typical class:

1. Students would read out their poetry homework; positive feedback was encouraged from the others.
2. In groups, students would analyse a poem from a set list, using the guidelines in the course booklet. Each group would do part or all of the analysis process - depending on time factors - and report back to the class. Then individual students would be encouraged to volunteer why they liked/disliked the poem, supporting their comments with quotations. We would continue discussions on *What defines a poet?* from these poems.
3. We would also discuss technical terms and the effectiveness of these techniques in the poem/s.
4. Students would be given a writing exercise, the theme for which they would choose.
5. During that writing time, I would work with individual students.
6. They would be expected to finish work on the class exercise, or write on another self-selected theme, for homework.

The objectives boxed above were in general met, according to the official feedback from students at the end of the course. Some time later, a further layer of interesting and unexpected rewards was indicated privately by two students. I was curious to see if this was general or isolated experience and telephoned the others. These were not structured interviews, and some of what I said to them may have been leading.

Because benefits volunteered during these conversations seemed to be ones not anticipated by them, and therefore not likely to have been mentioned earlier, in more formal student evaluation forms, I was encouraged to explore these ideas further. To this end, I was able to categorize what the students told me about the benefits of the course, as follows:

Structure

- As a result of focusing on economy of expression, they became more aware of tautology and "padding" in their writing.
- The ability to choose a point of view and argue a case with proof improved as a result of the analysis exercises. This benefited their report, letter, essay, and journalistic writing.
- The ability to structure prose writing improved from analysis, poetry editing processes, and the exposure to style. This helped them understand word relationships and how effective language is put together.
- Creative thinking/problem solving improved – a skill valued in the current job market.
- Another student said writing poetry focused him on clarity of intent. This helped give direction to his writing and in setting objectives. The latter of these has much wider implications than simply in business writing.

Vocabulary enhancement

- Focusing on finding the right word increased their vocabularies.
- The quest for the right word also helped them to understand the power of language.
- Fiction writing became more striking from focusing on choosing the right word, and from becoming more aware of the layers of meanings in words, word sequences, and their rhythms.

Economy of expression

- The process of paring back in writing poetry helped them to write more with fewer words.
- The editing process itself resulted in a better appreciation of precision and simplicity in writing. (One of the problems in teaching business writing is persuading people that direct, precise, reader-friendly writing is preferable to cliches and obfuscations.)

Creativity/Style

- The ability to think outside the box improved as a result of having to take risks: writing poetry is in itself a risk-taking process, as is writing to a theme they would not have chosen themselves. So artistic and journalistic skills were also enhanced.
- Creative thinking/problem solving improved – a useful skill in any employment.
- One mentioned a new ability to give pleasure to others through writing poems for friends/special occasions/gifts.
- Two mentioned the pleasure of playing with words in an unusually (for a polytechnic) unstructured way.

Values

- There was even cross-cultural value: one student said that writing poetry was made easier for her because it was like the Maori cleansing custom of "giving things back to the sea."

2.O Discussion

The class was not planned in anticipation of this range of transference, but even if that had been the case, it is difficult to see how the student feedback could possibly fit neatly into the general areas that their feedback led us to. Our conversations began with what

the students said, and only gradually were we able to isolate the more general ways that the experience of the poetry writing class had contributed to the development of these students' writing, so as to contribute to the effects cited above. Our discussion argues that development of voice and increased word consciousness were produced benefits to their other writing and brought an enhanced meta-cognitive way of working with words and structure. These improvements came because they were necessary to the shaping of experience into poetic form. The satisfaction that came from meeting the need to express lay behind these students developing into more effective writers after the course.

The student who is in an alienated state on the campus is likely to have trouble with gaining a voice for academic writing. A voice for writing is perhaps supposed to flow from a conversational knowledge of the significance of their subject: the pre-university stage that we fondly hope the student has on enrolment. And later, the student is meant to cultivate the voice in terms of the added confidence that comes with acquiring useful terms and phrases, as well as the standards of proof, and quality of evidence, appropriate to that subject at whatever level. This postulates layers of sophisticated language use that many of our students simply do not have, but they do have experience and some words for that experience. So, why did poetry help these students to develop voice? After all, poetry adds a mystic to these layers.

According to Rosenthal and Smith (1955:89), "a poem is a form of expression in which an unusual number of the resources of language are concentrated into a patterned, organic unit of significant experience". According to Howard Gardner, the poem signifies

the supreme evidence of linguistic intelligence [1993:73]. In each case, the reference is to a work of art whose "significance is not diminished but increased by analysis and study" [Rosenthal and Smith 1955:33]. So serious readers of poetry are challenged to display a sensibility broader than the merely intellectual, and to be a creator of poetry is beyond the hope of the ordinary mortal. No wonder then that we sense that with some students - though not those enrolled for the course that prompted this paper - the term poetry may have the effect of silencing or stifling their voices, or it may not have desirable associations, ie a "girlie" activity. Indeed it is our experience that poetry writing can best be taught to such students under another guise, eg, "intensive writing", or even by drawing their attention to popular song lyrics. But why do it at all? And why did it seem to work so well with these students. We must own that reason may be found most obviously in the negative: they were not overall serious readers of poetry, nor were they particularly averse to the word itself, as some students are.

Experience is important.* Tertiary students, typically those in the late teens to early twenties, are well placed to put poetic skills to good use. Mature, but still impressionable, they have had enough uplifting experience in their lives to see its value, and have endured enough discomfort to want to explore other ways of dealing with it. Discomfort plus disillusion, with the experiments that go wrong at a particularly vulnerable age and thrown into even sharper relief by hormonal wildfires, make poetry writing a valuable resource for students. It is, more than art for them, a way to name the demons, to make sense of a confusing world, a place to unload what is often felt as

* Alan Riach, Scottish poet until recently an academic in New Zealand, now Reader at Glasgow University, who participated in the launching of these students' book says that writing poetry is dependent more than anything on experience.

victimisation in a way that makes them feel in charge. In western society, more than ever, theirs is an age of chaos, developing, chaos, strategizing, and so on. Older students in their various ways sometimes supersede these patterns, but they remember and identify with them.

Along with poetry's providing a conduit for experiences - including the more mundane - tangential benefits occur. For example, in the course of making poems, students acquire *inter alia* the ability to bend the language to purpose, their own. This brings with it the power of language, and power over language. So writing poetry is a powerful mechanism for claiming a personal voice: the writer is in charge of the process; only s/he can judge whether the word is the best one, whether the form is suitable to, the cadences supportive of, the message.

Claiming a personal voice is indeed basic to any kind of writing. Before we can translate new information into our own words we have to have a voice, which is made up of enough of those own words to enable us to choose the appropriate one/s. The voice necessary for writing effective prose is, of course, different from the one required for lyric poetry. Perhaps, because of the personal agenda in the latter, we write poetry as a response to energy we already have, whereas students writing essays have to develop an agenda around a given topic. Own words are dependent, then, on being able to express one's own experience, and the expression of this own experience has a velcro edge that with thought and learning we might be able to attach to the velcro edge of somebody else's experience. This provides the kind of subjective truth that one gets from art. It requires the kind of checking out that goes on all the time in the mind and

senses, testing with other experiences, building up and tearing down, revising constructs. Further, it requires adding to, testing against others' experiences, the cross-subjectivity which is the sifting and evolving ground of all art.

Primary school teachers know that learning to write has to begin with the child's experience; this process seems to carry on through secondary schooling. But at tertiary level, when student experience is beginning to take on sophistication, and can be so dramatic - and their socialization depends on transforming it - not enough attention is paid to the necessity for transforming this experience via language. At least our experience with tertiary students would indicate this lack. Anthropologists tell us that it is only comparatively recently in human history that language has been used for the storing and passing of information. Its primary use, historically as well as now, is for relationship and socialization purposes. Thus it seems reasonable to suppose that personal creative writing could be an essential step for some students in constructing other kinds of more depersonalized writing.

For tertiary students, there are additional issues to be confronted in cultivating and maintaining a voice acceptable for business-oriented and other more academic purposes. For example, three writing problems for beginning students are:

1. the use of clichés, eg "at your convenience" when they mean "when it suits you,"
2. the use of multi-syllabic words in an effort to impress, eg. "deconstruction and internalisation of transformational biological ideologies.." when they mean something, but nobody is sure what.

3. the tendency to merely regurgitate ideas from a number of sources for an essay or report, parroting and conveying sometimes articulate-sounding, but essentially surface, learning,

The students who read, absorb and write with a voice must have taken the process a step further, and made the knowledge their own, and we contend that writing their own poetry is a way of taking that further step. This is the process: poetry provides students with a good space to self-edit and self-critique, to consider the precision of their words, the structure and so on because they know best what the agenda is. In this way it provides a place to learn precision and structure and clarity where they have authority, and therefore confidence.

The expectation of this particular course was first of all the obvious: that students would learn to put their observations and experiences down in a reasonably acceptable poetic style. After all, they had come voluntarily on the course: it was an elective. In order to achieve this style, they would learn to use techniques such as onomatopoeia, metaphor, personification to enhance their writing; and they would learn to cut out the unnecessary. From past experience, there was also the expectation that they would enjoy developing a new skill, or extending one they already had. However, before any of these conditions could be met, it was imperative that a safe and supportive environment be provided for the establishment of voice (see above).

In the service of that, they were expected to learn and apply the tools of poetry analysis. To this end, they were given a booklet containing a broad range of poems including a good number from New Zealand poets. Also included was an example of the stages of metamorphosis through which a poem moved to its final version. This material was meant to:

- provide models of the best poetry writing
- provide a broad range of styles and subject matter
- provide material with which to appreciate how and why poetry works
- show poetic techniques used well
- give students an understanding that poetry rarely arrives on the page without needing reworking.

While these expectations were generally met, student feedback revealed other benefits in their experience of the course. These were not necessarily universal, but reflected individual responses and were indicative of their needs and aspirations. For example, they mentioned being able to write better essays, think more creatively, write better copy for advertisements, or choose a point of view and argue a case, ie, it focussed students on the importance of having clarity of intent in their writing. In the words of the students, writing poetry helped them "to think in a more creative way", to "say a lot in a little space", to "structure" their writing, to capture "images on …paper".

According to Quentin, a deaf student, poetry writing "forces you to focus on vocabulary, [using] different words from ones you'd normally use." The process made him think "structurally about how it's going to sound and look on the page." He went on to say "with poetry it's the removal of unnecessary words, the focus on every word having a place, and being big on pictures, getting as many ideas in with as few words as possible, eg instead of *grey* sky, *prozac* sky. There was also a spin-off in prose writing [with] the focus on structure, key words, paring down to elements. In my first assignment for [the Story-Telling course]. I got 100% [the tutor] couldn't find any grammar or structural errors either – that was also a spin-off."

Quentin's writing indicated qualities of thought and poetic potential beyond that of most students in that class and, perhaps partly because of being a mature student, he arrived in the class with more interest in the craft of writing poetry for its own sake. Whereas Doreen, also a mature student, thought when she applied for the course that she "couldn't do the poetry part". But it "tapped something inside" her. It reminded her of "the Maori way of giving things back to the sea – a *karakia* on the beach, taking everything, using hands all over the body and throwing it out to sea, like a cleansing." For Doreen, then, ultimately the usefulness of poetry writing in relation to other kinds of writing was secondary to the poetic purpose itself. Interestingly, this seemed to be true of the class generally as signified by the title they gave to their collected works at the end of the course.

These exercises in shaping the personal into the poetic carried these students into using their meta-cognitive abilities. They had to think about their experience, and indeed, think about their own thinking, in order bring their critical faculties to the business of shaping their poems and at the same time keeping these poems true to the experience they wished to convey. Have others found poetry similarly useful?

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